

# A Global Nomad: Santiago's Journey in *The Alchemist* as a Narrative of Transnationalism and Globalization

*Afaqullah Khan*

*\*Imdad Ullah Khan*

*Syed Mujeebullah Shah*

---

**ABSTRACT:** *Transnational books have become more popular in today's age of easier travel thanks to globalization and increased cross-border migration. Literary authors that stand out for their diversity and have gained recognition on a worldwide scale are a result of globalization. Thus, literary studies and the study of globalization are beginning to converge, whether globalization is viewed as primarily economic and political or as more broadly cultural. The current article reads Paulo Coelho's "The Alchemist" as a symbolic narrative of nomadic identity and cross-border existence that is common in today's era of international travel. By writing a book with characters from several countries, Coelho has created a fictional universe in the book where knowledge flows across borders and overcomes national barriers. The protagonist Santiago's experiences and character growth are emphasized in this bildungsroman novel. He struggles to find and achieve his personal legend which becomes his major goal in the narrative. After a long and tiresome journey, Santiago finds that what he was looking for was right in front of him the whole time. The current article focuses on how the symbolic journey of the protagonist parallels modern-day internationalism and globalization. It focuses on individual sociocultural assimilation strategies as shown in the character of Santiago to understand the text in terms of modern increased intercultural contact and its impact on individuals.*

**Key Words:** Transnationalism, globalization, personal legend, *bildungsroman*, self-discovery, treasure, dream, travel.

---

\*Email: [Imdad.Khan@uswat.edu.pk](mailto:Imdad.Khan@uswat.edu.pk)

## Introduction

Originally published in Brazil in Portuguese, *The Alchemist* (1988) soon became a widely translated bestseller international novel. Santiago, the protagonist of the story, is a dreamer who sets out on a journey of self-discovery to seek his treasure at the Egyptian pyramids. The plot of the novel revolves around Santiago and how his character develops as he sets out to find the hidden treasure that will change his life. He meets an alchemist, who tells him that he will not achieve his goal of finding the treasure unless he is willing to go through many ordeals. The novel is a *bildungsroman* concerned with the character development and experiences of the protagonist (Mishra 20). He struggles to find and achieve his personal legend which becomes his major goal in the narrative. At the conclusion of the narrative, Santiago realizes his personal legend as he becomes aware of what his treasure actually is. After a long and tiresome journey, Santiago finds that what he was looking for was right in front of him the whole time.

*The Alchemist* opens with a young child, Santiago, arguing with his father about how he doesn't like being a priest and doesn't like studying at home. Instead, he prefers to travel and appreciate the beauty of life. He then chooses not to continue his education and gets a job as a shepherd. Santiago begins to have a recurring dream in which he comes to know about a treasure at the Egyptian pyramids but he is unable to locate it. Someone mentions a female fortune teller to him who could interpret his dream. She interprets his dream to mean that he should go to the Egyptian pyramids. She makes him promise to give her a tenth of his treasure if he found it. Later, he runs into an old man who offers him the same advice but asks for a share from his flock in return. In order to pursue his goals, Santiago sells his flock and travels to Africa where he is robbed and made to work in a crystal copy shop at the summit of a mountain. As he continues on his journey, Santiago meets and falls in love with Fatima, an African desert living at the oasis of Al-Fayoum. Santiago dreamt of finding treasure buried at the pyramids but discovers it's buried in Andalusia, Spain, his hometown. Santiago vows to return the treasure to the woman he loves.

The fact that Santiago tells his father at an early age that his life's goal is to travel and that he will not become a priest shows how determined he is about living on his own terms. He would rather work as a shepherd rather than accept the relatively lucrative and comfortable life as a priest. He wants to travel the world, meet new people, and experience different cultures. While some people supported him and others just took advantage of him, the

realization of his hidden fortune caused the biggest shift in his character (Hart 204). Through his travels, he was exposed to transnationalism and globalization. Santiago's international travels led to the creation of his own unique legend and the discovery of his treasure (Morgan 17). The current paper aims to analyze elements of transnationalism and globalization in *The Alchemist* by reading the text as a symbolic narrative of the international outlook and multicultural worldview of the protagonist. The paper analyzes how does transnationalism evoke a personal legend in the novel and what are the implications of this legend for the life of the protagonist Santiago? In conclusion, the paper draws attention to the relevance of transnational narratives in today's globalized world where different cultures come into contact more frequently than the previous centuries in world history.

### **Globalization and Transnationalism**

Globalization is the term used to describe the phenomenon of economic, political, and social change that results from the opening up of international borders to increasingly fast flows of goods, services, finance, people, and ideas (Kolb 20). It also includes the changes in the institutions and policies at national and international levels that facilitate or promote such flows. Globalization has affected every aspect of life since the mid-twentieth century. Globalization has been a major factor in the world economy since World War II. Examples of globalization that have received worldwide attention include the rise of air travel, the Internet, and international communications networks.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, transnationalism refers to the movement of ideas, people, and capital across national borders in the modern global era. Morgan argues that transnationalism describes aspects of literary circulation and movement that defy reduction to the level of the nation-state (20). The terms globalization and transnationalism both describe contemporary societal development but differ according to the level of analysis—globalization focuses on macro-level change, while transnationalism focuses on micro-level change (Appadurai 129). Despite their differences, globalization and transnationalism are co-related with each other; the former refers to larger world issues and phenomena while the latter tends to describe individual lifestyles and consequences.

The movement of people from one geographical location to another in today's globalized society necessitates that each individual use his or her own sociocultural assimilation strategies (Raulya 201). Since many societies

around the world have their own distinct ways of organizing their daily lives following their own conventions, standards, and social presumptions, cultural practices fluctuate from one area to another in an extremely wide range. Assimilation of many cultures has become essential for all human beings in the modern, globalized society. Both the terms "globalization" and "transnationalism" are employed to describe the ongoing unification of cultures of many nations around the world during which most people have become transnationalism while they migrate, travel, and trade beyond borders. According to García and Kleifgen, the number of transnationalism cases is increasing constantly, and currently, the main reasons for transnationalism are economic, political, and social (92).

Murta seeks the elements of transnational literature, popular culture, and postmodernism in *The Alchemist* (36). She claims that Coelho symbolizes cultural hybridity, not as a barrier to, but rather as an amplifying factor, human potential. Santiago's nomadic journey makes use of his experience's intersecting cultures. As a result, he takes on the character of someone knowledgeable about the world's ancient traditions. In *The Alchemist*, Coelho is open to the possibility of other ways to live, in the sense that he shows different approaches taken by individuals toward life, relationships, and social responsibilities. Santiago is depicted as an intuitive young man who chooses a mystical path that he explores through a self-directed lifestyle and a thrust for nomadic wanderings in the world (Raulya 51). Santiago chooses to focus on listening to his heart and feeling the universe at work rather than concentrating on things that appear logical to others.

### **Personal Legend and Economic Dreams**

Dreams about a bright and prosperous future are often referred to as economic dreams. "Dream" is defined by Pirnajmuddin and Medhat as a means of social status and prosperity in a society built on free and equal opportunities (20). Santiago mentions both the present and the future in his description of a dream, not just past experiences. Some studies suggest that Coelho's *The Alchemist* can be understood in terms of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theory because Santiago's dreams, which he had never forgotten, had an impact on his life (Nurfajrin 102). When a person is conscious of their mission and has faith in their dreams, they progress toward their goals and ideal life (Mugrib et al. 99).

A personal legend is how a person can regard life as fulfilling. The only way

to fulfill one's destiny is to understand the contents of the personal unconscious, that is, the fears and wants that drive the individual as well as the conflicts that threaten the decision-making process, waste energy, and restrict the individual's creativity. To realize one's true self, personal awareness must be expanded into that of the Self, uniting the lower with the greater Self (Nurfajrin 29). According to Mishra, the "personal legend," in which characters pursue their goals and journeys of self-discovery, reappears frequently in Coelho's book (99). Although they encounter challenges along the way, sticking to their dreams may be the only way for them to experience spiritual fulfillment.

### **Methodology**

This study is conducted with a qualitative methodology and makes use of library research methods. This research examines how the literary genres of transnationalism and globalization affect a protagonist's personal mythology in Paulo Coelho's novel *The Alchemist*. The text of the novel is closely examined to understand it as a narrative work that is centered on internationalism and globalization (Culler 43). The text of *The Alchemist* will be the main source of knowledge for this analysis. We'll utilize relevant books, journals, and other secondary materials. The researchers' study involved assembling data from a range of sources, including the book itself, the internet, reference books, and other materials that provide specific relevant information to inform the analysis in the current article.

Novelists and other literary authors compose their writings using a variety of essential elements, such as metaphors, narrative techniques, themes, and the language they utilize. Examining these elements helps us to identify clues in little parts of the text that help us grasp the whole work through careful textual reading for literary analysis (Lothe 20). Many questions should come up during the careful reading process. To identify any symbolic significance that could be concealed behind the story's apparent storyline, a researcher must first connect with the text at a deeper multidimensional level. Close reading is a process of gathering as much data as you can to produce as many questions as you can to completely understand the text, even if it might at times feel like overanalyzing (Smith 67). In this way, literary analysis through textual interpretation is a process of developing a strong analysis that considers the text's larger relevance to the readers' social and private life. Therefore, a researcher must comprehend that readers' interpretations of the

meaning of the book may be seen differently based on their interpretative lens. Because a researcher must continuously return to the text after some reflection and analyze how all of the insights and solutions he suggests may be logically tied to the actual text in the work of literature, textual analysis is essentially iterative and repetitive.

## **Analysis**

### **Transnationalism**

When Santiago's father advises him to continue his studies and become a priest, he refuses. It is the first significant indication in the novel that highlights transnationalism. Becoming a priest is a very good option because it is a well-respected profession in that community but he opposes this and tells his father that he does not want to become a priest. He decides to become a shepherd and travel the world since he wanted to learn more about the world. In order to get it, he rejects the recognized and effective role of the priest. Later in the novel, Santiago meets the Old Man who affirms his choice of becoming a shepherd. He also tells him that it is a great lie that we do not control destiny:

“What’s the world’s greatest lie?” the boy asked, completely surprised.

“It’s this: that at a certain point in our lives, we lose control of what’s happening to us, and our lives become controlled by fate. That’s the world’s greatest lie.”

“That’s never happened to me,” the boy said. “They wanted me to be a priest, but I decided to become a shepherd.”

“Much better,” said the old man. “Because you really like to travel.”

(Coelho 27)

His ambition to see the world and learn about its diverse cultures, ideologies, and nations inspired him to invent his legend. Although he had studied Latin, Spanish, and theology and was good in all three, Santiago chose to become a shepherd rather than a priest because he found that he preferred the beauty of nature. This shows his strong desire to have a happy life and his intense interest in the world.

Being a priest in Spain was a very prestigious and good job, but instead of

choosing a respectable job, he chose one that required more work and energy. He took this choice because he wanted to travel the world and decided to work as a shepherd to do so. He would have been restricted to a single city or nation if he were a priest and would not be allowed to travel the world. However, as a shepherd, he is free to travel and discover any region or nation he chooses. He can carry out his dream of traveling the world, meeting new people, speaking with them, spending time with them, and even living with them by being a shepherd.

He owned a jacket, a book he could trade for another, and a flock of sheep. But, most important, he was able every day to live out his dream. If he were to tire of the Andalusian fields, he could sell his sheep and go to sea. By the time he had had enough of the sea, he would already have known other cities, other women, and other chances to be happy. (Coelho 6)

By the end of the book, Santiago realizes that what he has and what he is aware of are his hidden treasure. Transnationalism encourages a personal legend that drives him and provides him with a source of motivation. When he leaves home, he realizes that what we have, what we know, and what we are great at is essentially our secret treasure.

We can analyze transnationalism in several parts of the book. According to the narrator, "The jacket had a purpose and so did the boy. His purpose in life was to travel" (Coelho 8). The boy's jacket also had a function, as does everything in life. Thus, the boy's goal was to travel and experience other cultures. The boy certainly had a reason for existing, which was to travel and see the world: "Ever since he had been a child, he had wanted to know the world, and this was much more important than knowing the god and learning about man's sin." The author includes a religious element in this passage. This is because most religions hold that everything in the world has a reason for existence (8).

When Santiago meets a clairvoyant who is an expert at reading dreams, she says: "I am not going to charge you anything now but I want one-tenth of the treasure if you find it", Coelho 1988, p. 14). The boy laughed because he did not believe that he will find the hidden treasure. He, therefore, agreed to the deal. Nations in the modern world often operate similarly. If you want to visit

developed nations, you will need to pay for it before you get there. This is a key benefit of globalization for the developed countries that have an enormously large share of the economic wealth concentrated in those nation-states.

The king of Salem warns Santiago that if he starts by promising to give something he doesn't yet have, he will lose interest in pursuing it and won't be able to find his goal. He's trying to tell him that if you don't have faith in his dreams and you can't offer him what you have, then you might not even attempt you won't be able to discover or realize your legend. The old king is attempting to change him and help him discover his legend by trying to teach him a lesson. Santiago later realizes that everything in this world has a cost and that nothing can be obtained in this life for free. He also comes to understand that if you want to realize your dreams and establish your personal legend, you must make a sacrifice before you can fulfill your dreams or become a legend in your own right. "I know why I want to get back to my flock, he thought. I understand sheep; they are no longer a problem, and they can be good friends" (Coelho 67). After some time, he finally realized what his treasure was, what he knew the best, and what he was an expert at. That is his treasure, and he comes to realize this when he first travels to Africa and later to Egypt. He also realizes this when he loses all of his possessions and begins working at a crystal shop., Eventually, he realized that the role of a shepherd was his greatest value since it fit who he was and what he knew best.

Santiago gradually comes to understand through his nomadic journey that cultures and people are connected just as elements of the world are connected. That people do not necessarily need to speak the same language to get along with one another. Even when they are unable to understand each other's languages, people can communicate across cultures and languages:

While they were erecting the stall, one of them had spoken Arabic and the other Spanish. And they had understood each other perfectly well. There must be a language that doesn't depend on words, the boy thought. I've already had that experience with my sheep, and now it is happening with people. ...If I can learn to understand this language without words, I can learn to understand the world. (Coelho 24-25)

These lines illustrate Santiago's process of assimilating into various tribes'



cultures and forming a transnational identity. Based on shared characteristics like language, culture, or location, his nomadic fluid identity appears to be taking the place of his earlier more fixed identity.

### **Globalization**

Santiago goes out in search of his hidden treasure and dreams of discovering it. His journey in *The Alchemist* can be read as a symbolic rendering of the way many people travel the world in search of a personal legend and dreams of economic mobility in the present age of globalization. In a globalized world, the relationship between two nations where they share resources and offer support is conditioned upon a reciprocal relationship. Santiago uses the journey to look for his famous treasure as a metaphor for a more mature way of living in a globalized world. As he travels, he makes several transactions along the way to protect himself or to reach his destination. Analogously, in today's globalized world, one nation may offer something or some opportunities, but in return, that nation would also want something. In the novel, everyone who offers to help Santiago also expects something in return. The fortune teller wants a tenth of the boy's wealth, and the Old Man then demands that he give him a sixth of his sheep. This give-and-take dynamic underlies the narrative in the novel as well as our political economy in recent times.

The main plot point of *The Alchemist* is the discovery of Santiago's treasure. "Am I going to find my treasure?" he asks (Coelho 43). He is unsure of whether he will find his hidden treasure, as evidenced by the question he asks himself. He then makes several trips in search of that lost treasure before settling on a solution. To fulfill his dream of finding his hidden treasure, he travels from Spain to Africa and then to Egypt. He eventually understands what his true treasure was. He begins to realize that in today's society, your knowledge, skills, and possessions are your most valuable assets. When he is robbed at the foot of the Egyptian pyramid, the robber tells him about his dream of finding a hidden treasure:

In my dream, there was a sycamore growing out of the ruins of the sacristy, and I was told that, if I dug at the roots of the sycamore, I would find a hidden treasure. But I'm not so stupid as to cross an entire desert just because of a recurrent dream." The boy stood up shakily and looked once more at the Pyramids. They seemed to laugh at him, and he laughed back, his heart bursting with joy. Because now he

knew where his treasure was. (Coelho 143).

Paulo Coelho tries to persuade us that what we have and what we know best is our hidden treasures and that we shouldn't be worried about our decision to move to another country. He stresses the importance of travel and its ability to enlighten us on our own lives by revealing what remains too familiar to notice in our known surroundings. The crystal shop merchant exemplifies this. He had given up his dreams of economic prosperity and a trip to *Makkah* for a Muslim pilgrimage. However, after he comes into contact with Santiago, his ideas begin to stir: "Today, I understand something I didn't see before... You are forcing me to look at wealth and horizons, I have never known. Now I see how immense my possibilities are" (Coelho 31). The ambition to do better than he is already doing disturbs the crystal merchant because he does not want things to change, even if for the better. However, Santiago has shaken his old complacency with the *status quo* and now he could not forget that there were other possibilities that he could have capitalized on.

At the beginning of the novel, Santiago realizes that he must make his destiny and not let anyone else decide it for him. To better his financial situation, Santiago goes to Egypt. He initially sells his sheep before setting off on his quest. All of his money is taken when he arrives in Africa, forcing him to work since he needs the cash to both repairs his financial status and be able to keep traveling in quest of his buried fortune. When he falls in love with Fatima, she wants him to be financially stable before she will be pleased with him. The only thing standing between Santiago's financial fortunes and his dream of attaining real greatness is Fatima. He chooses to continue his quest for the treasure. These themes in the story highlight Santiago's desire for an improvement in his social and financial situation. Finding and understanding his life's mission and personal legend leads to this progress.

By the end of the novel, Santiago can complete his symbolic journey and come full circle as he matures into a refined person. The title of the novel denotes Santiago as an alchemist who transforms himself from a shepherd to a mature, wealthy, and knowledgeable person in the course of his travels around the world. 'Alchemy' means the 'art of transmuting metals' and is both a philosophy and an ancient practice focused on the attempt to change base metals into gold. Santiago goes through, more or less, the same process, and attains wisdom, maturity, and a global outlook.

## Conclusion

Transnationalism and globalization are contemporary phenomena as people relocate to other countries in search of a better life and better opportunities for success (Ambrosini 112). It is the force driving everyone who wants to relocate abroad to fulfill their legend. Santiago is portrayed in *The Alchemist* as someone who likes to travel and meet new people. Santiago thinks that leaving his hometown and his native Spain will probably help him discover his personal legend. He discovered what his hidden treasure was and what he could accomplish in life as time went on and he started to reflect on some of his life's experiences. Thus, *The Alchemist* is a coming-of-age fiction and an allegorical tribute to the journey of self-discovery presented as the story of a young man who comes to terms with his international ambitions and a desire to travel to unseen destinations.

In a modern world where travel is becoming simpler, globalization and rising cross-border migration have contributed to the emergence of transnational novels, globalization has produced authors who are distinguished by their multiculturalism and have found a voice in the global arena (Jay 126). Whether it is seen as economic and political or more widely cultural, literary studies have started to overlap with the study of globalization. By creating a novel that features characters from a variety of nations, Paulo Coelho has brought his fictional world into being – a world where the flow of information crosses borders and transcends national boundaries. To create a transnational interpretative community that acknowledges and transcends national borders, Coelho needs to write about the compelling topics of transnational fiction in an original, imaginative way.

About transnational authors, Lemus points out, “These authors, whose creative minds are influenced by their transnational identities, have helped drive literary criticism in a new direction, adding to the powerful impact of transnational literature” (3). The contributions of these cross-border fiction writers range across a variety of genres, including science fiction, crime fiction, romance, utopian and dystopian novels, thrillers, and detective stories. In the last few years, literary and cultural studies have taken a transnational turn, which is both a positive and an exciting one, promising new forms and expressions of coherence (Jay 125). The field continually builds on the strength of new critical approaches and paradigm shifts, which may seem at first as though they are fragmenting the discipline when they

are renewing it. The phenomena of globalization, which is altering how individuals think about the globe and experience their worlds, is best understood by immigrant and bicultural writers (Thomsen 27).

In today's globalized culture, people must necessarily apply their assimilation strategies when they travel from one geographical context to another (Lemus 40). As nations try to separate themselves from foreign cultures and stress differences rather than commonalities, the assimilating strategies individuals use to adapt to other countries must be shaped by the societies they enter. This requires being open to alternative ways of life and a willingness to suspend judgment before understanding a different culture (Byram and Petra 2). The use of such techniques may potentially pose risks. Whether deliberately or inevitably, a person must at the very least be able to live in the strange world they inhabit. An important goal of this study was to identify Santiago, the major character in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*, as a cultural navigator who uses his assimilation tactics to adapt to different social and cultural settings as he wanders across borders in search of his treasure. To overcome the obstacles he faces in his journey to retrieve wealth, Santiago must apply his techniques for blending into a new society. As such, he is shown as a prototype of a multicultural person equipped with intercultural skills of empathy, adaptation, and learning from other cultures.

## Works Cited

- Ambrosini, Maurizio. *Irregular immigration in Southern Europe: Actors, dynamics and governance*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Byram, Michael, and Petra Rauschert. "Introduction: Language Teaching, Education for Democracy and Cross-curricular Connections." *Iranian Journal of Language Teaching Research*, Vol. 10, no. 3, 2022, pp. 1-7.
- Coelho, Paulo. *The Alchemist*, Translated by Alan R. Clarke, Harper Collins, 1988.
- Culler, Jonathan. "The Closeness of Close Reading." *ADE Bulletin*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2010, 20-25.
- García, Ofelia, and Jo Anne Kleifgen. *Educating emergent bilinguals: Policies, programs, and practices for English learners*. Teachers College Press, 2018.
- Hart, Stephen. "Cultural Hybridity, Magical Realism, and the Language of Magic in Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*." *Romance Quarterly*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2004, 304-312.
- Jay, Paul. *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies*. Cornell University Press, 2010.
- Kolb, Melina. "What is globalization? And How has the Global Economy Shaped the United States." *Peterson Institute for International Economics*. 2018. <https://www.piie.com/microsites/globalization/what-is-globalization>
- Lemus, Wendy. *Otherworldliness: Uncanny Literary Devices in the Liminal Spaces Created by Transnational Authors*. East Carolina University, 2021.

- Lothe, Jakob. *Narrative in Fiction and Film. An Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2000.
- Mishra, Jyoti. *Paulo Coelho's Fiction Existential and Spiritual Preoccupation; Select Study of Seven Novels*. LAP Lambert Academic Publishing, 2012.
- Morgan, Peter. "Literary Transnationalism: A Europeanist's perspective." *Journal of European Studies*. Vol. 47, no. 1, 2017, 3-20.
- Mugrib, Nuz Chairul, and Zulfah Zulfah. "Pilar's Existence in Her Love Story Shown in Paulo Coelho's *By The River Piedra I Sat Down And Wept*." *NOBEL: Journal of Literature and Language Teaching*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2016, 98-119.
- Murta, Anna Pavlova. *Paulo Coelho: Transnational Literature, Popular Culture, and Postmodernism*. University of Arkansas, 2018.
- Nurfajrin, Rasyida Alfi. *The influence of dream on Santiago's life in the Alchemist by Paulo Coelho*. Diss. Universitas Islam Negeri Maulana Malik Ibrahim, 2015.
- Pirnajmuddin, Hossein, and Vahid Medhat. "Linguistic Deviation in Poetry Translation: An Investigation into the English Renderings of Shamlu's Verse." *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, vol. 2, no. 6, 2011. 13-29.
- Raulya, Krishna Bahadur. *Cultural Assimilation as a Survival Technique in Paulo Coelho's The Alchemist*. Diss. Central Department of English, 2019.
- Smith, Barbara Herrnstein. "What was 'close reading'? A Century of Method in Literary Studies." *The Minnesota Review*, vol. 87, no. 2, 2016, 57-75.
- Thomsen, Mads Rosendahl. "Strangeness and World literature". *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, vol. 15, no. 5, 2013, 18-32.

